

FINDING A FATHER'S LOVE



By Max Lucado

Introduction

No price is too high for a parent to redeem his child. No energy too great. No effort too demanding. A parent will go to any length to find his or her own.

So will God.

Mark it down. God's greatest creation is not the flung stars or the gorged canyons, it's his eternal plan to reach his children. Behind his pursuit of us is the same brilliance behind the rotating seasons and the orbiting planets. Heaven and earth knows no greater passion than God's personal passion for you and your relationship with him.

Listen as God articulates his passion: "My heart beats for you and my love for you stirs up my pity. I won't punish you in my anger and I won't destroy Israel again. I am God and not a human. I am the Holy One, and I am among you."¹

Before you read any further, reflect on those last four words, "I am among you." Do you believe that? Do you believe God is near? He wants you to. He wants you to know He is in the midst of your world. Wherever you are as you read these words, He is present. In your car. On the plane. In your office, your bedroom, your den, He is near.

He has involved himself in the car pools, heartbreaks, and funeral homes of our day. He is as near to us on a Monday as on a Sunday. God comes to the place where you live, steps up to the door, and knocks. But it's up to you to let Him in.

¹ Hosea 11:8-9

Chapter 1

YOU CAN COME HOME

England. Nineteenth century. Christmas. In a small town there is the tradition of a village party where all the children receive gifts. It is a festive occasion; the bright smiles of the youngsters, a tall tree at the square, colorful packages. There is a young retarded man in the town who, because of his handicap, is the victim of many cruel jokes. The trick played on him this Christmas Day is the cruelest of all.

As the mountain of gifts becomes smaller and smaller, his face grows longer and longer. He is too old for a gift, but he doesn't know that. His childlike heart is heavy as he watches everyone receive presents except himself. Then some of the boys come to him with a gift. His is the last one under the tree. His eyes dance as he looks at the brightly wrapped package. His excitement soars as he tears away the ribbons. His fingers race to rip away the paper. But as he opens the box, his heart sinks.

It's empty.

The packaging was attractive. The ribbons were colorful. The outside was enough to get him into the inside; but when he got to the inside, the box was empty!¹

Ever been there?

Many people have—

A young mother weeps silently into her pillow. All her life she had dreamed of marriage. "If only I could have a home. If only I could have a husband and a house."

So now she's married. The honeymoon has long since ended. The tunnel she dug out of one prison only led her to another. Her land of Oz has become a land of dirty diapers, car pools, and bills.

She shares a bed with a husband she doesn't love. She listens to the still sleep of a child she doesn't know how to raise. And she feels the sand of her youth slide through her fingers.

A middle-aged businessman sits in his plush office staring blankly out the window. A red German sports car awaits him in the parking lot. There is a gold ring on his finger and a gold card in his wallet. His name is in brass on a walnut door and a walnut desk. His suit is tailored. His shoes are hand-sewn, his name well known.

¹ This story is popularly attributed to Harry Emerson Fosdick.

He should be happy. He possesses the package he set out to get when he stood at the bottom of the ladder looking up. But, now that he has what he wants, he doesn't want it. Now that he is at the top of the ladder, he sees that it is leaning against the wrong building.

He left his bride in the dust of his ambition. The kids that called him daddy don't call him daddy anymore; they have a new one. And though he has everything that success offers, he'd trade it in a heartbeat to have a home to go home to tonight.

"I've counted the holes in the ceiling tiles a hundred times." The voice shook in spite of an attempt to sound stable. "They say I'll be in this cast for six weeks. They also say I'm lucky to be alive."

His voice was barely audible through the oxygen mask. The skin on his forehead and nose was scraped.

"They keep asking me what I remember. I don't even remember getting into the car much less driving it. I'd never tried crack before. I guess I tried too much. I'll think before I try it again. In fact, it looks like I'm going to have plenty of time for thinking."

No games. No noise. No flashing lights. Your dreams have come true but instead of letting you sleep, they are keeping you awake. What do you do at a time like this? Where do you go when the parade stops? Your failures suck the sandy foundation of your future out from under you. Now what do you do?

You can blame the world. The prodigal son could have done that. In fact, he probably did.²

The boy stared at his reflection in the muddy puddle. He questioned whether the face was really his. It didn't look like him.

The flame in the eyes had been extinguished. The smirk had been humbled. The devil-may-care attitude had been replaced with soberness.

He tumbled headlong and landed face first.

It wasn't enough to be friendless. It wasn't enough to be broke. It wasn't enough to pawn his ring, his coat, even his shoes. The long hours walking the streets didn't break him. You would think that the nights with only a bunkhouse pillow or the days lugging a bucket of pig-slop would force a change of heart.

But they didn't. Pride is made of stone. Hard knocks may chip it, but it takes reality's sledgehammer to break it.

His was beginning to crack.

² Luke 15:11-27

His first few days of destitution were likely steamy with resentment. He was mad at everyone. Everyone was to blame. His friends shouldn't have bailed out on him. And his brother should come and bail him out. His boss should feed him better and his dad never should have let him go in the first place.

He named a pig after each one of them.

Failure invites finger-pointing and buck-passing. A person may be out of money, out of a job and out of friends but he is never out of people to blame.

Sometimes it's the family:

"If my parents had taken their job more seriously. . ."

"If my husband wasn't so selfish. . ."

"If my kids had any respect for me. . ."

"If I had been potty-trained earlier. . ."

Sometimes it's the system:

"No one can make a good grade in this school!"

"If I had been given an equal shot, I would have been promoted."

"This whole place is rigged."

"There is no way a person can move up in this world."

Even the church has a few bucks passed its way.

"Oh, I'd attend church, but did you know I went to church once back in '58 and no one came to visit me?"

"That group of folks? A bunch of hypocrites."

"I plan on going back to church. Just as soon as I find one that is teaching the proper doctrine, housing all the homeless, feeding all the sick and giving green stamps for attendance awards, then I'll go back."

Soon you are right and everyone else is wrong. You are the victim and the world is your enemy.

A second option is to continue playing the games, only this time with a little more abandon.

My wife has a cousin named Rob. Rob is a great guy. His good heart and friendly smile endear him to everyone. He is the kind of fellow you call upon when you can't call on anyone else.

So when the Girl Scouts needed someone to dress up like the Cookie Monster at a fundraiser, who did they call? You got it. Rob.

There were a few problems. First, no one anticipated the day of the campaign would be so hot. Second, Rob didn't know that the costume would be so big. Third, who would have thought that Rob's glasses would fog up so badly that he couldn't see? As he was sitting on the stage waiting his turn to speak, the heat inside the mask covered his glasses with fog. He couldn't wipe them off—his paws were too big to fit in the eyehole.

He started to worry. Any minute he would be called upon to give a talk and he couldn't even see where the podium was!

He whispered for help. The costume was too thick and his cries went unheard.

He began to wave his hands. What he heard in response were the squeals of delight from the kids. They thought he was waving at them!

As I heard this story I chuckled...and then I sighed. It was too familiar. Cries for help muffled behind costumed faces? Fear hidden behind a painted smile? Signals of desperation thought to be signs of joy?

Tell me that doesn't describe our world. Ever since Eve hemmed the fig leaves to fit Adam, we have been disguising our truths.

And we've gotten better with each generation.

Michelangelo's creativity is nothing compared to a bald man's use of a few strands of hair. Houdini would stand in awe at our capacity to squeeze lumberjack waistlines into ballerina-sized pants.

We are masters of the masquerade. Cars are driven to make a statement. Jeans are purchased to portray an image. Accents are acquired to hide a heritage. Names are dropped. Weights are lifted. Yarns are spun. Toys are purchased. Achievements are professed.

And the pain is ignored. And, with time, the real self is forgotten.

The Indians used to say that within every heart there is a knife. This knife turns like the minute hand on a clock. Every time the heart lies, the knife rotates an increment. As it turns, it cuts into the heart. As it turns, it carves a circle. The more it turns, the wider the circle becomes.

After the knife has rotated one full circle, a path has been carved. The result? No more hurt, no more heart.

One option the boy in the pigpen had was to walk back into the masquerade party and pretend everything was fine. He could have carved his integrity until the pain disappeared. He could have done what millions do. He could have spent a lifetime in the pigpen pretending it was a palace. But he didn't.

Something told him that this was the moment of—and for—truth.

He looked into the water. The face he saw wasn't pretty—muddy and swollen. He looked away. "Don't think about it. You're no worse off than anybody else. Things will get better tomorrow.

The lies anticipated a receptive ear. They'd always found one before. "Not this time," he muttered. And he stared at his reflection.

"How far I have fallen." His first words of truth.

He looked into his own eyes. He thought of his father. "They always said I had your eyes. He could see the look of hurt on his father's face when he told him he was leaving.

"How I must have hurt you."

A crack zigzagged across the boy's heart.

A tear splashed into the pool. Another soon followed. Then another. Then the dam broke. He buried his face in his dirty hands as the tears did what tears do so well; they flushed out his soul.

His face was still wet as he sat near the pool. For the first time in a long time he thought of home. The memories warmed him. Memories of dinner table laughter. Memories of a warm bed. Memories of evenings on the porch with his father as they listened to hypnotic ring of the crickets.

"Father." He said the word aloud as he looked at himself. "They used to say I looked like you. Now you wouldn't even recognize me. Boy, I blew it, didn't I?"

He stood up and began to walk.

The road home was longer than he remembered. When he last traveled it, he turned heads because of his style. If he turned heads this time it was because of his stink. His clothes were torn, his hair matted, and his feet black. But that didn't bother him, because for the first time in a calendar of heartaches, he had a clean conscience.

He was going home. He was going home a changed man. Not demanding that he get

what he deserved, but willing to take whatever he could get. "Give me" had been replaced with "help me," and his defiance had been replaced with repentance.

He came asking for everything with nothing to give in return. He had no money. He had no excuses.

And he had no idea how much his father had missed him.

He had no idea the number of times his father had paused between chores to look out the front gate for his son. The boy had no idea the number of times his father had awakened from restless sleep, gone into the son's room, and sat on the boy's bed. And the son would have never believed the hours the father had sat on the porch next to the empty rocking chair, looking, longing to see that familiar figure, that stride, that face.

As the boy came around the bend that led up to his house, he rehearsed his speech one more time.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you."

He approached the gate and placed his hand on the latch. He began to lift it, then he paused. His plan to go home suddenly seemed silly. "What's the use?" he heard himself asking himself. "What chance do I have?" He ducked, turned around, and began to walk away.

Then he heard the footsteps. He heard the slap, slap, slap of sandals. Someone was running. He didn't turn to look. *It's probably a servant coming to chase me away or my big brother wanting to know what I'm doing back home.* He began to leave.

But the voice he heard was not the voice of a servant nor the voice of his brother; it was the voice of his father.

"Son!"

"Father?"

He turned to open the gate, but the father already had. The son looked at his father standing at the entrance. Tears glistened on his cheeks as arms stretched from east to west inviting the son to come home.

"Father, I have sinned." The words were muffled as the boy buried his face in his father's shoulder.

The two wept. For a forever they stood at the gate intertwined as one. Words were unnecessary. Repentance had been made, forgiveness had been given.

The boy was home.

If there is a scene in this story that deserves to be framed, it's the one of the father's out-stretched hands. His tears are moving. His smile is stirring. But his hands call us home. Imagine those hands. Strong fingers. Palms wrinkled with lifelines. Stretching open like a wide gate, leaving entrance as the only option.

When Jesus told this parable of the loving father, I wonder, did he use his hands? When he got to this point in the story, did he open his arms to illustrate the point?

Did he perceive the thoughts of those in the audience who were thinking, "I could never go home. Not after my life."? Did he see a housewife look at the ground and a businessman shake his head as if to say, "I can't start over. I've made too big a mess."? And did he open his arms even wider as if to say, "Yes. Yes, you can. You can come home."?

Whether he did that day or not, I don't know. But I know that he did later. He later stretched his hands as open as he could. He forced his arms so wide apart that it hurt. And to prove that those arms would never fold and those hands would never close, he had them nailed open.

They still are.

Chapter 2

A FATHER'S LOVE

"Max, your dad's awake."

I had been watching a movie on television. One of those thrillers that takes you from the here and now and transports you to the somewhere and sometime. My mother's statement seemed to come from another world. The real world.

I turned toward my father. He was looking at me.

His head was all he could turn. Lou Gehrig's disease had leached his movement, taking from him everything but his faith . . . and his eyes.

It was his eyes that called me to walk over to his bedside. I had been home for almost two weeks, on special leave from Brazil, due to his worsening condition. He had slept most of the last few days, awakening only when my mother would bathe him or clean his sheets.

Next to his bed was a respirator—a metronome of mortality that pushed air into his lungs through a hole in his throat. The bones in his hand protruded like spokes in an umbrella. His fingers, once firm and strong, were curled and lifeless. I sat on the edge of his bed and ran my hands over his barreled rib cage. I put my hand on his forehead. It was hot ... hot and damp. I stroked his hair.

"What is it, Dad?"

He wanted to say something. His eyes yearned. His eyes refused to release me. If I looked away for a moment, they followed me, and were still looking when I looked back.

"What is it?"

I'd seen that expression before. I was seven years old, eight at the most. Standing on the edge of a diving board for the first time, wondering if I would survive the plunge. The board dipped under my seventy pounds. I looked behind me at the kids who were pestering me to hurry up and jump. I wondered what they would do if I asked them to move over so I could get down. Tar and feather me, I supposed.

So caught between ridicule and a jump into certain death, I did the only thing I knew to do—I shivered.

Then I heard him, "It's all right, son, come on in." I looked down. My father had dived in. He was treading water awaiting my jump. Even as I write, I can see his expression—tanned

face, wet hair, broad smile, and bright eyes. His eyes were assuring and earnest. Had he not said a word, they would have conveyed the message. But he did speak. "Jump, it's all right."

So I jumped.

Twenty-three years later the tan was gone, the hair thin and the face drawn. But the eyes hadn't changed. They were bold. And their message hadn't changed. I knew what he was saying. Somehow he knew I was afraid. Somehow he perceived that I was shivering as I looked into the deep. And somehow, he, the dying, had the strength to comfort me, the living.

I placed my cheek in the hollow of his. My tears dripped on his hot face. I said softly what his throat wanted to, but couldn't. "It's all right," I whispered. "It's going to be all right."

When I raised my head, his eyes were closed. I would never see them open again. He left me with a final look. One last statement of the eyes. One farewell message from the captain before the boat would turn out to sea. One concluding assurance from a father to a son, "It's all right."

Perhaps it was a similar look that stirred the soul of the soldier during those six hours one Friday.

He was uneasy. He had been since noon.

It wasn't the deaths that troubled him. The centurion was no stranger to finality. Over the years he'd grown calloused to the screams of the crucified. He'd mastered the art of numbing his heart. But this crucifixion plagued him.

The day began as had a hundred others—dreadfully. It was bad enough to be in Judea, but it was hell to spend hot afternoons on a rocky hill supervising the death of pickpockets and rabble rousers. Half the crowd taunted, half cried. The soldiers griped. The priests bossed. It was a thankless job in a strange land. He was ready for the day to be over before it began.

He was curious at the attention given to the flatfooted peasant. He smiled as he read the sign that would go on the cross. The condemned looked like anything but a king. His face was lumpy and bruised. His back arched slightly and his eyes faced downward. "Some harmless hick," mused the centurion. "What could he have done?"

Then Jesus raised his head. He wasn't angry. He wasn't uneasy. His eyes were strangely calm as they stared from behind the bloody mask. He looked at those who knew him—moving deliberately from face to face as if he had a word for each.

For just a moment he looked at the centurion—for a second, the Roman looked into the purest eyes he'd ever seen. He didn't know what the look meant. But the look made him swallow and his stomach feel empty. As he watched the soldier grab the Nazarene and yank him to the ground, something told him this was not going to be a normal day.

As the hours wore on, the centurion found himself looking more and more at the one on the center cross. He didn't know what to do with the Nazarene's silence. He didn't know what to do with his kindness.

But most of all, he was perplexed by the darkness. He didn't know what to do with the black sky in mid-afternoon. No one could explain it ... no one even tried. One minute the sun--the next the darkness. One minute the heat, the next a chilly breeze. Even the priests were silenced.

For a long while the centurion sat on a rock and stared at the three silhouetted figures. Their heads were limp, occasionally rolling from side to side. The jeering was silent ... eerily silent. Those who had wept, now waited.

Suddenly the center head ceased to bob. It yanked itself erect. Its eyes opened in a flash of white. A roar sliced the silence. "It is finished."¹ It wasn't a yell. It wasn't a scream. It was a roar ... a lion's roar. From what world that roar came the centurion didn't know, but he knew it wasn't this one.

The centurion stood up from the rock and took a few paces toward the Nazarene. As he got closer he could tell that Jesus was staring into the sky. There was something in his eyes that the soldier had to see. But after only a few steps, he fell. He stood and fell again. The ground was shaking, gently at first and now violently. He tried once more to walk and was able to take a few steps and then fall . . . at the foot of the cross.

He looked up into the face of this one near death. The King looked down at the crusty old centurion. Jesus' hands were fastened—they couldn't reach out. His feet were nailed to timber, they couldn't walk toward him. His head was heavy with pain, he could scarcely move it. But his eyes . . . they were afire.

They were unquenchable. They were the eyes of God.

Perhaps that is what made the centurion say what he said. He saw the eyes of God. He saw the same eyes that had been seen by a near-naked adulteress in Jerusalem, a friendless divorcee in Samaria, and a four-day-dead Lazarus in a cemetery. The same eyes that didn't close upon seeing man's futility, didn't turn away at man's failure, and didn't wince upon witnessing man's death.

"It's all right," God's eyes said. "I've seen the storms and it's still all right."

The centurion's convictions began to flow together like rivers. "This was no carpenter," he spoke under his breath. "This was no peasant. This was no normal man."

¹ John 19:30

He stood and looked around at the rocks that had fallen and the sky that had blackened. He turned and stared at the soldiers as they stared at Jesus with frozen faces. He turned and watched as the eyes of Jesus lifted and looked toward home. He listened as the parched lips parted and the swollen tongue spoke for the last time.

"Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit."²

Had the centurion not said it, the soldiers would have. Had the centurion not said it, the rocks would have—as would have the angels, the stars, even the demons. But he did say it. It fell to a nameless foreigner to state what they all knew.

"Surely this man was the Son of God."³

Six hours on one Friday. Six hours that jut up on the plain of human history like Mount Everest in a desert. Six hours that have been deciphered, dissected, and debated for two thousand years.

What do these six hours signify? They claim to be the door in time through which eternity entered man's darkest caverns. They mark the moments that the Navigator descended into the deepest waters to leave anchor points for his followers.

What does that Friday mean?

For the life blackened with failure, that Friday means forgiveness.

For the heart scarred with futility, that Friday means purpose.

And for the soul looking into this side of the tunnel of death, that Friday means deliverance.

Six hours. One Friday.

What do you do with those six hours on that Friday?

² Luke 23:46

³ Matthew 27:54

STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 1: You Can Come Home

Read Luke 15:11-32

1. What drove this young man to reconsider his way of living (v.v. 14-16)? How is this story often replayed in the modern world?
2. Compare what the young man says in verse 18 to what King David said in Psalm 51:4. What sentiment is the same in both?
3. How does the father in verse 20 picture our heavenly father? Do you think it is a good picture? Why?
4. Compare verses 18-19 with verse 21. Note which part of the son's prepared speech gets left off. Why do you think the son was unable to finish the whole prepared speech?
5. Was the young man worthy of the treatment he received in verses 22-24? How is this scene a picture of grace?
6. Have you ever felt like the older brother in verses 25-30? Explain.
7. How is the father's description of his son in verse 32 a good description of every Christian?

Chapter 2: A Father's Love

Read Mark 15:33-39

1. What statement was God making by causing darkness to fall over the land for three solid hours during the height of the afternoon?
2. Read through Psalm 22:1-18. This portion of Scripture was written hundreds of years before Christ was born, yet it contains detailed descriptions of what would happen at the crucifixion. What details presented in Psalm 22 can you match with the gospel account in Mark 15?
3. What prompted the centurion to say of Jesus, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (v. 39)?
4. Who do you think Jesus is? On what basis do you give your answer?
5. If the centurion fully understood his words, what course of action should he have taken?
6. If it is true that Jesus is the Son of God, what course of action should you take? What is your relationship to him?

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